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Remembering John DeFrancis

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When John DeFrancis died, we invited FOB (friend of the blog) David Moser to write this piece, drawing on his background in Chinese studies and comparative linguistics. Moser holds a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and is Academic Director of the CET Beijing Chinese Studies program. He was a contributor to a compilation dedicated to DeFrancis entitled Schriftfestschrift: Essays in Honor of John DeFrancis on His Eightieth Birthday.
By David Moser

Legendary sinologist, linguist and educator John DeFrancis passed away on January 2, 2009 at the age of 97.

For any student of the Chinese language and writing system working in the latter part of the twentieth century, DeFrancis was simply a titan. Prior to his arrival on the scene, major China scholars researching the Chinese script, such as Bernard Karlgren, Arthur Waley and Herbert Giles, tended to communicate mainly with other experts, while the popular press, under the spell of figures such as Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa, reinforced notions of the Chinese script as exotic, ineffable, mystical or even – pardon the term – inscrutable. After a century of confusing myths and sheer nonsense promulgated about the Chinese characters (some of it occasionally produced by even the above-mentioned scholars), DeFrancis appeared and changed everything by producing a steady stream of invaluable books and articles that presented the facts about the Chinese writing system in a clear and coherent fashion for specialists and lay readers alike.

The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy (1984—still in print) is an explanatory marvel that still holds up perfectly. If you are currently studying Chinese and have not read this book, go get it instantly. Amazingly lucid and informative, it is still without a doubt the best source for understanding all the various linguistic, historical, cultural and pedagogical aspects of the Chinese characters. After decades of researching and teaching the Chinese language and script, DeFrancis was well aware of how easy it is for even well-meaning scholars to make simplistic or misleading claims about the Chinese writing system. He knew that, confronted with the labyrinth of faulty assumptions and stereotypes, a true understanding of Chinese writing required the utmost clarity and focus of mind.

In a passage teasing apart the key concepts of "language," "speech" and "writing," DeFrancis writes:

> Authors who are clear in their own minds about the range of meanings involved in these terms are usually careful in their use of specific terminology. Careful readers of such authors are likely to obtain a clear understanding of what is being said. But confused and careless writers, and careless readers of such writers (and of careful authors as well), can create a cloud of misunderstanding. This has indeed happened to Chinese on a scale that appears to exceed that for any other form of human communication." (*The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy*, p. 40)

DeFrancis succeeded in dispersing this cloud of misunderstanding once and for all. It was George Orwell who said "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle." I, along with many intrepid students of Chinese in the 1980s, spent countless hours staring at characters just a few inches from my nose, but was not able to truly fathom their nature until I read the DeFrancis book. I had been told by friends and informants – Chinese and Western alike – that Taiwan school kids can read Confucius in the way we could read Shakespeare; that speakers of Cantonese speak exactly the "same" Chinese as Mandarin speakers, only with a different pronunciation for each character; that the average Chinese "knows" about 5,000 (or 8,000 or 10,000) characters; that each character is a picture of something; that each character is mysteriously imbued with more semantic meanings than English words; that *pinyin* could be used for learning the sounds of Chinese, but Chinese could never be represented adequately by using an alphabetic system; and so on.

Fact and Fantasy debunks all these diehard notions by providing the reader with the clearest, most conceptually nuanced explanation of the Chinese writing system ever put into print. Given the esoteric

linguistic nature of the subject matter, the book is a remarkably easy read, exhaustively thorough and precise without being geeky. I always recommend the book to my students (including Chinese students; as evidence for the Orwell observation, Chinese people are not born with a clear functional understanding of the characters they use every day), and each time I dip into it, I appreciate again how DeFrancis was able to demystify the Chinese writing system while at the same time not diminishing a certain awe for its complexity and cultural uniqueness.

Which is not to say DeFrancis was a defender of their continued use. Ever a beady-eyed pragmatist, DeFrancis was very much in the camp of language reformers such as Lu Xun, who called for the abolition of the characters in favor of an alphabetic system. Indeed, Peter Hessler reports in his book *Oracle Bones* that Mao Zedong's botched plan to eradicate the Chinese characters (Mao called for the development of a Chinese alphabet instead of simply adopting the Roman alphabet) infuriated DeFrancis so much that he refused to return to China for 49 years.

DeFrancis was also one of the most influential language educators of his time. Students of Chinese today, who swim in a world of Internet sites, podcasts, interactive multi-media CD-ROMs, hand-held translation and dictionary gadgets, and a plethora of time-tested paper-and-ink textbooks at all levels, are perhaps to be forgiven if they do not appreciate the importance of DeFrancis' monumental twelve-volume series of Mandarin teaching texts published by Yale University Press, commonly referred to simply as "the DeFrancis series." During the 1970s and 80s there was nothing else comparable in the field of Chinese textbooks, and many ambitious students of Chinese cut their teeth on this magnum opus.

Part of the reason for the series' sheer heft (of which I was acutely aware, having lugged it from apartment to apartment during my years of study) was precisely because in those pre-Internet days there was a relative lack of other Chinese-language resources, and so this method was designed to be quite self-contained. There were so many practice drills that one could – and many did – go through it without a teacher. Perusing the series now, one is struck by the out-dated usages and quaint formality required by the times (DeFrancis was in the midst of revising the text when he died). Still, what emerges from the structure is a reminder that language is not just words and grammar rules, but *patterns*. In the DeFrancis method, each new linguistic pattern was introduced, placed in varying contexts, and then woven seamlessly into the fabric of structures one had already acquired. In this sense, it was more than just a Chinese textbook; with its logical pacing and cumulative philosophy, it was effectively a cognitive model of how to go about mastering *any* language. And its effect on a generation of scholars is indisputable.

Active well into his 90s, DeFrancis's last great gift to the field of Chinese language study was the *ABC Dictionary*, a phenomenally useful reference tool that I call on nearly every day. (In fact, I had just consulted this dictionary a few minutes before I read the email from a colleague informing me of DeFrancis's death.) Funded in part by DeFrancis's own money, the *ABC Dictionary* project filled a longstanding gap in Sinology, providing readers with lexical items arranged completely alphabetically by *pinyin*, thus avoiding the problem of "Which Graph is it, Anyway?" when confronted with a new term in a spoken context. You simply don't know how useful this arrangement is until you start using it. The work bears all the hallmarks of DeFrancis's output; it is clear, concise, rigorous, and academically invaluable. It also addresses a problem that was always right there – in front of everyone's nose – but it took John DeFrancis to notice it and address it in his inimitable way.

For further information on John DeFrancis's life and work, see this special memorial site, his Wikipedia entry, the New York Times *obituary, or the brief, impassioned tribute by Andrew Leonard of* Salon*.*